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Webster Says He Was Assured by Meese In August That Iran Sales Were Legal

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WASHINGTON—Federal Bureau of Investigation Director William Webster has told associates that he was assured by Attorney General Edwin Meese last August that U.S. arms sales to Iran were entirely appropriate and legal.

When Mr. Webster first raised questions about the secret sales, the attorney general informed him that "all legal requirements were met" before weapons were shipped, the FBI director has told associates and others.

But Mr. Webster is expected to tell the Senate Intelligence Committee today that, with the benefit of hindsight, he thinks senior White House and law enforcement officials should have been more vigilant in dealing with the thorny legal and political issues raised by the secret initiative.

The committee is considering Mr. Webster's nomination to head the Central Intelligence Agency. But today's hearing will

also provide the first detailed public examination of Mr. Meese's actions during the early phases of the Iran-Contra affair, while providing new information about the steps he took to determine what President Reagan and White House aides knew about the affair. Before the start of the hearing, the committee is scheduled to release excerpts of confidential testimony it received from Mr. Meese last year.

Law-enforcement officials and congressional aides said that Mr. Webster doesn't feel that Mr. Meese misled him, and the FBI chief isn't planning to criticize the attorney general's actions or motives directly. But "based on all of the information that is now available," said one official familiar with the chronologies and testimony prepared for Mr. Webster, "there clearly are questions and different opinions about how the issue initially was handled" by Mr. Meese.

Complaints About Meese

Lawmakers want to determine whether Mr. Meese and the FBI director discussed the lack of congressional notification about the Iran initiative. Members of the intelligence panel also are expected to question Mr. Webster closely about complaints by other FBI officials that the attorney general didn't move quickly enough last November in launching a full-fledged criminal investigation of the Iran-Contra scandal.

During a news conference earlier this week, Mr. Meese said he didn't recall any conversation with Mr. Webster during the summer about Iran arms sales, but the attorney general didn't contest the FBI chief's statements. Mr. Meese also has maintained that he moved aggressively to begin an FBI investigation as soon as he had firm information indicating potential criminal violations.

Investigators said that Mr. Meese, in closed-door testimony before the Intelligence Committee last year, described a four-day delay between the discovery of a memo outlining planned diversion of millions of dollars from the arms sales to the Nicaraguan insurgents and the formal authorization to start an FBI criminal investigation. The memo was contained in the files of fired National Security Council aide, Lt. Col. Oliver North.

The delay, according to Justice Department officials and summaries of Mr. Meese's testimony provided by investigators, was necessary partly to determine whether President Reagan or his top aides authorized such diversion of funds.

What Webster May Say

Mr. Meese has told investigators that his fact-finding effort concluded that President Reagan never approved or knew about any diversions.

According to investigators, Mr. Meese also told lawmakers last year that despite repeated private meetings with then-CIA director William Casey, he never directly confronted Mr. Casey with Col. North's memo.

In his appearance before the committee, Mr. Webster is expected to reiterate that he wasn't consulted before the decision to sell arms to Iran. "We were privy to some after-the-fact information," Mr. Webster told reporters when news about the sales first leaked out last November, but the FBI wasn't "a party to the original decision or its implementation."

Mr. Webster also is expected to emphasize the importance of establishing firm controls on CIA covert operations. In previous congressional testimony about combating terrorism, the FBI chief stressed that the U.S. "should be prepared to stand up and say, 'This is what we did and why we did it.'" If administration officials "can't satisfy ourselves that our action is legitimate," he told the Senate Judiciary Committee last month, "we probably shouldn't take it."